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Research Paper for WRIT 1301- We came up with our own topics.

All My Brown

Introduction

My box of crayons usually had one colour that looked brand new in comparison to the stubs that used to be other colours. As a child, I hated using brown in art class. Perhaps it reminded me of my own skin colour, and the conflict of always having used the peach colour pencils to shade humans in art class in school. I did not know then of brown to be the colour of beautiful things, like trees, mud, and food. Interestingly, the appearance of the term ‘brown’ in child-directed speech is significantly less than other colour terms, and children have been found to prefer the colour brown significantly less than basic colours. This means that colour preference may be linked to the language of colour (*I*). The absence of interaction between the colour and our words results in a void about the qualities we prescribe to brown. As a result, in talking about our own skins, the question of who is brown and what shade of brown is both intimate and uncomfortable.

Brown covers my body and surrounds me, in everything I see. It simmers in the pressure cooker. It clumps around the spinach plants. It climbs and falls from the trees. It melts between holding hands. Brown is a reservoir of memory and emotion. In this paper, I will be dipping into the colour to generate sensory experiences that can fill the body of a scientific research paper.

Andrew Solomon says, “Forge meaning. Build identity. Identity involves entering a community to draw strength from that community, and to give strength there, too. It involves substituting “and” for “but”...” My mother tells me not to label myself as anything. I find Mr. Solomon’s approach richer.

I am brown and I am here. I am brown *and* I am *here*.

Dal Makhani and Pongal

Brown celebrates the sweet, tangy, sticky, melting with butter, spicy, and wholesome. It is the primary colour in our food. My mother only buys unprocessed, organic ingredients. We joke at home that everything is brown- the rice, the eggs, the sugar. *Amma* cooks her ingredients into every shade of brown.

Dal makhani is rich, slightly sweet, creamy and savoury bliss in a copper pot that is meant to drip from a buttery piece of *naan*¹. Restaurant-made dal makhani has a distinct colour. It is shiny, bordering on almost orange. When *Amma* made it at home, it was served in little steel bowls into which I dipped a hot piece of *roti*. The roti was warm, and dotted with darker brown patches where it had been burnt a little. The dal² made at home was darker than in the restaurants. It tasted earthier.

Pongal is my favourite sweet dish. My mother makes it for our new year celebration, which comes every spring. We always start our meals with a little bit of the sweet dish, and there is no joy like picking up the grains of Pongal between my fingers, tasting their sweetness in my mouth, and biting into a plump raisin.

Methods

Amma washed the dal and placed it in the big round steel bowl. The beans were wet, shiny, and dark brown. The bowl was filled with warm water in which the dal soaked for three hours. The white kitchen light hit the wet beans and the steel container, reflecting light everywhere. An eager child walked into the kitchen and hovered over the bowl. The water was drained and dal

¹ Naan and roti are types of Indian breads that are eaten with lentils or vegetables

² Dal refers to lentils

washed again. *Amma* added five cups of water, two tablespoons of ghee, salt and ginger-garlic paste to the pressure cooker container. The dal was cooked for another thirty minutes. The brown swelled and suddenly gained taste. To the dal in the cooker, *Amma* added tomato puree, kasoori methi, garam masala, jaiphal powder³, and butter. The tomato would give the dal its shine and reddish earthy undertone. The dal simmered for thirty minutes. *Amma* stirred it occasionally. The dal was transferred to a wok. By this time, at least one child had to be told to vacate the wooden swing in front of the television and get back to studying before dinner was served. To the dal, *Amma* added milk mixed with cream. This made the gorgeous brown even richer and creamier. *Amma* mixed the dal well and let it simmer to develop the colour and smoothness. She then began rolling out the *rotis* and calling for her children to come set the table.

To make the Pongal, *Amma* cooked the rice, lentils and milk until they formed a soft, pulpy mass. Then, over a low flame, she added the molasses. Molasses is sold as a cylindrical block that is cut with a knife into shavings to be powdered and mixed in the dish. The rice-milk mixture welcomed the dark golden-brown sugar as *Amma* stirred and turned over the mixture in the pan multiple times to prevent it from sticking and leaving stubborn burnt brown marks. The rice, milk and sugars were cooked until the *Pongal* became sticky.

Cashew nuts, raisins, and nutmeg were fried and added to the *Pongal*. Each one studded the *Pongal* with a different edible brown. The cashew nuts were smooth and light brown, raisins wrinkly, sweet, juicy, and the spicy-sweet nutmeg was the colour of caramel. A lot of clarified butter was added in the end to bind all the brown together and coat every grain, nut, and raisin with the tastiest glow.

³ Kasoori methi, garam masala and jalphal powder are spices and seasonings

Results

Mayank left the rich brown flavours of home for Paris, where he studies at Le Cordon Bleu. Last week, he cut a nerve and an artery in an accident in the kitchen. When he was receiving stitches for his cuts, his blood spurted out of the cut artery. The doctors told him he had HIV based on his blood, and the chestnut brown of his skin. He believed he had HIV for a week. His eyes are green, flecked with brown- hazel. As his best friend from middle school, I have had the privilege of hiding with him from the girls in school who were especially attracted to the colours of his eyes. It hurts to know that those eyes held fear. Yesterday, he received his secondary results for an HIV test. They were negative.

Brown packages hold damaged goods. There is a large body of scientific study that points to the correlation between racial bias and lower quality of healthcare.

Of course, in psychiatry we see this [discrimination]. One area we see is in terms of diagnosis. Patients are inappropriately diagnosed and medications prescribed for the patients. We see errors in that. Minority patients will often be diagnosed inappropriately as being schizophrenic. (African-American physician) (2)

It is an unstable layer at the interface of many interactions. So, I gently poured the sulphuric acid down the sides of the test tube. I held the tube steady and took in a slight breath. My eyes lit up and I called for my Chemistry teacher, Mr. Vasu. He stood in front of the test tube I was holding up, peering into it with the biggest smile on his face. The result of the test was clear. The appearance of the brown ring at the interface of the sample and the sulphuric acid confirmed the presence of nitrate ions in the sample being tested. I held the tube carefully to keep the brown layer from decomposing, and I was no longer the clumsiest chemistry student in my grade.

Conclusion

Brown is a personal history, a method, a cause, and a result. My copper-golden skin, that I am said to have inherited from my grandfather, flows into the hands of a dear friend; his brown-flecked eyes hold magic. I consume food harvested from the mud, that my mother cooks into a swollen, delicious mix of browns. And all these browns culminate in the delicate balance of two liquids in a test tube, indicative of our larger experiment. From one skin to another, the brown flows in and out of our bodies. Its beauty lies in its instability, how quickly it deepens and darkens over the fire, the grief it has brought collectives of people, and finally, in this acceptance.

I am brown and I am here. I am brown *and* I am *here*.

References

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